

Transcript: Governor Gregoire addresses the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (Feb. 9, 2012)

Well, I invited myself today and I'm really glad that I have a chance to talk with you. As I look at the folks here and realize that I appointed all of you. But you realize, I didn't appoint you to do what you're doing.

We're in a very difficult challenge. So I wanted to come, if I could answer and any questions you might have and talk to you a little bit about where I see us going.

I'm a typical Washingtonian. State parks is how I grew up. Single mom, we went tent camping. I in turn with my daughter, that's what we did we went camping at state parks. And I bet you could go around the state and Washingtonians will tell you similar stories.

Not that we've given a lot of thought to what we're going to do next year, but one of the things we've always had in our heads is we're going to visit national parks. We were at a retirement party recently for my daughter's father-in-law. And there had been a story in the paper about how Mike and I were going to buy an RV and go visit the national parks. An individual at the party said to me, whom I don't know this individual very well. But he said to me, are you actually going to do that? I said, well, no. I'd never buy an RV. But we are going to go visit national parks. He said well how are you going to? I said well, we're looking at pop-up tent trailers. But we're not really sure yet, but it kind of reminds me of my childhood and I kind of want to go out there and do it again. And the guy sat back in his chair and said, I've just gotta get this straight for a moment, you live in the governor's mansion, immediately after leaving it, you're going to get in a pop-up tent trailer. You probably haven't been with your husband 24/7 in what 30 plus years? And you're going to be with him 24/7 on the road, everyday in your pop-up tent trailer visiting national parks. Let me know how that goes for y'all.

I can't tell you how excited I am. I woke up the next morning and I turned to Mike and I said, is this going to work for us? Are we missing something here? We're going to get along, aren't we? Can't we go back to the days when we used to tent camp with the kids?

But that's what Washington state is all about. Parks are part of our culture. It's who we are. And I suspect, as I said, every Washingtonian will say the same thing.

But having said that, we are in the most difficult of times. As we refer back to 1980 or 81, 82, yeah, those were tough times, but they don't compare in any way, shape or form to the situation we find ourselves in today. I talked with Governor John Spellman. He's the first to say, no, this is a whole lot worse. We were in worse recession in the history of the country and the history of state of Washington. So I know how hard it is for you all to make the decisions that you are having to make that will result in people being laid off their jobs. My heart goes out to those, whose lives are going to be disrupted, who may find totally without a job or in seasonal employment. I know how difficult these decisions are for you to make, and I know how difficult this is for the people that are getting these notices. I know it's very hard for us to give up programs that we love that are a part of the park system and have always been there and people have reached out and said how much they enjoy them. And I know the Discover Pass and proceeds from it have been disappointing. Let me just assure you, you've been less disappointed than I have. I thought it would work unbelievably well. Now why did I think that? After all the cuts, all the cuts. Ten and a half billion dollars in cuts. And I know you know this, but it's a 32 billion dollar budget, we've cut ten and half billion dollars. So anybody in the parks department or anybody in the state, who suggests, well, what you've said is parks is less important than anything else. Ten and half billion. So I can assure you I hear this every day. K through 12 says how could you have cut us 26 percent? The community colleges with similarly cut, say how can you do this to us? Our four-year universities, 46 percent. Our safety net is frayed. Our public safety is at risk, so don't be assuming that parks have been put to the bottom of the rung in the terms of priority. Everybody is getting cut. Everybody is feeling the pain. And the pain is felt in ways that none of us really can fathom, not in terms of the agency, but in terms of the people that we serve.

I want you to know that after all the cuts last legislative session and all of the input I got in the office, what was the number one complaint about cuts that I got? State parks. I'm not saying that because I'm here, I say that to everyone. So that's what gave me unbelievable hope that the Discover Pass would work, and would work beyond our wildest dreams. Because the immediate and volume of feedback was how in the world can you cut state parks?

Well, I can't cry over spilled milk. It hasn't worked, and the fact is, we are where we are with respect to the Discover Pass. Now we need to do what we've talked about in terms of the legislation. And it's moving and I'm convinced it will reach my desk, and, obviously, I will sign it. But since it hasn't worked, but let me go back to how you implemented it, by the way, the Discover Pass. Six weeks. Out on the ground. Moving forward. Good on you. To you and your team and your staff. Good job. Who would have ever thought you could put it together that quickly.

But we now have an 11 million dollar shortfall. So while I still have high hopes for the Discover Pass, and maybe we're in an adjustment period. And when we do this adjustment with the legislation, I'm hopeful that will help us, you know I can't bank on it. I cannot bank on it. I cannot assume we're going to plug the 11 million dollar hole with a renewed energy behind the Discover Pass. With renewed energy by those who visit the parks. By a new way of doing that. So, and I'm asking you not to do so either. We just simply can't assume that that's going to work for us.

So you've taken steps to address the budget shortfall, and I want to thank you for it. First thing I understand you have done is you have said you are going to keep the parks of Washington state open. Good call. We cannot close these parks because we're in a budget shortfall. Now, how do I know this? I want to liken it to ferries. I want to liken it to ferries. OK? We have raised the rates on our ferry system. And assuming, of course, in the budget that would give us new revenue. And in fact, it has not, why? Because people are not riding the ferries anymore. So you cut off runs, and they will ride even less. So if we want a shot at having the Discover Pass work, the last thing we do is close our parks. So good call on your part. I want to tell you I will do anything I can to reinforce the decision that you made.

You have made the tough call that we do have to reduce, we have to flatten the management structure, we have to reduce headquarters staffing, we have to look at seasonal staffing. Not decisions you wanted to make, not decisions that you want to make and continue to make. But decisions, you, by necessity, had to make, and I know how tough it is. I make those decisions myself. And I want you to know, thank you. And I'll bet you've not been told that. And so I'm here to say thank you, because you have had to make and you did step up and make the difficult decisions.

I know you're looking at increasing revenue in some way, shape or form. And I want to talk more about that in a second. And I know you're looking at things like could the parks embrace the work that you're doing between Puget Sound Partnership and our military. At looking at how we can do some mitigation projects. Parks is a wonderful partner to make that happen and it will bring us revenue. I know you're looking at other grants out there. Absolutely there are, we just need to be creative and innovative and go get those grants. I also know you're looking at other ways in which we can save the parks.

So, I'll take your questions, but I want to come with one message. We look back at 81, 82, 83. I have called John Spellman and said thank you for having the guts as a republican governor to stand up and raise the sales tax one penny to save the state. Now I'm having enough trouble asking, and in a yet much worse recession, for a half a penny to save education in the state. So I understand how difficult the decision was for him. And he reminds me full well that he didn't get re-elected. I remind him I'm not running again. But the point is, he made the toughest decision as governor that he had to make. And it was the right call. And it was the right decision. And he's now supporting me in my efforts, because he knows that when you come out of the recession you can't go back and regroup and redo and undo the damage that you've done. A child who isn't given an education today, how are you going to go back and undo that damage? Somebody who didn't get health care today, how are you going to go back and undo that? Closing a state park, I have to ask you, how are you going to go back and undo that without spending so much more money? I look down at Maple Lane right now, it's still on a warm closure. I'm asking the prison system whether there's some use we can put it to? Because once it goes into cold, we'll

never open it again. It's just too costly. Same is true with our state parks. So I want to join you in letting the history of the state of Washington, in the worst recession ever, to reflect that we did not close our state parks. That we kept on tenaciously, steadfastly, standing behind our culture and the people of the state of Washington.

Having said that, I don't have a path to get there. But I do know time is of the essence. We do not have any time to waste. So as you come forward with a plan, and I'm asking you, rev it up, include me in your plan. Is it the holy pulpit you want? You got it. Is there something else I can do? Let me know. And I can deliver to you others who will join in this effort. Names of people like Dan Evans, Mike Lowry, who will join in the effort. Don't underestimate the people of the state of Washington and what they will do when called to help. Either by volunteer.

Think about local governments, who might want to at least temporarily, if not permanently, keep a state park. And if you can have confidence that they're capable and you will hold them accountable, they may very well be able to do that. And we should allow that to happen. Start looking at ourselves not as a parks commission, but a set of entrepreneurs who are looking at a new way of doing business. Your job is to market. Your job is to come up with a new idea that's unique and will be embraced by the people of the state of Washington. Why can't we have Madonna half-time show that will knock their socks off? Why can't we have a 30-second ad for the Super Bowl that everybody will go, "There's a WOW!" That's the kind of thing that we draw everybody's attention, and then we ask them for help. Then we ask them to join us in making sure that the history in this state shows that we kept our state parks through the worst recession ever and we left a legacy to our children they deserve. So I've come to say thank you for your hard work.

I've come to tell you time is of the essence. I've come to tell you, I and others are ready to help you in whatever call you may make. Call. Let's go. Let's make it happen. Let's let history reflect that you, and you are the history, history will reflect that you as commission members stood fast, did the right thing, preserved the parks of the state of Washington and left a legacy for our children. So with that I'd be happy to take your questions.